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Identidad femenina y narración en *Alias Grace* de Margaret Atwood

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to explore the importance of storytelling in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* taking into account social and gender issues. With this novel based on the real case of the murder of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear, Atwood gives the main character – Grace –, the opportunity to speak for herself in a world dominated by male voices. Therefore, by focusing on Grace, in addition to three other female characters, this paper analyses the relationship between narration and the concept of identity. It aims to reinforce the relevance of literature connected with the idea of memory from an individual's perspective. For the reason that narration and oral tradition are a way of both giving voice to those who have been silenced as well as a way of passing on knowledge through generations.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este ensayo es explorar la importancia de la narración en la novela *Alias Grace* de Margaret Atwood teniendo en cuenta cuestiones sociales y de género. Con este relato basado en el caso real de asesinato de Nancy Montgomery y Thomas Kinnear, Atwood da a la protagonista – Grace – la oportunidad de hablar por si misma en un mundo dominado por voces masculinas. Por lo tanto, centrándose en Grace, así como en otros tres personajes femeninos, este estudio analiza la relación que existe entre narración y el concepto de identidad. Pretende reafirmar la relevancia de la literatura conectada con la idea de memoria desde una perspectiva individual. Porque la narración y la tradición oral son dos formas de dar voz a aquellos que han sido silenciados y a su vez de pasar el conocimiento de una generación a otra.

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The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a speeded-up Darwinian ecosystem, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world.

-Norman Page, Preface of *Margaret Atwood* x, 1995

1. INTRODUCTION

In the same way that the world does not ever stop spinning over its axis, it does not stop changing either. How hopeless would it be if it did not change at all? In fact, thanks to the shifting quality of the world, we, as humanity, are able to learn from our mistakes in order to improve every aspect of life. It is our responsibility to make things better. One of the tools that contribute to this outcome is Literature. Nonetheless, as the world changes so does Literature with it. Literature and its different genres evolve to ensure their survival. Moreover, Literature is also used to make sure that everything that has happened does not get lost into oblivion. It brings about the collection of events that help to conceive History. However, History is not only about communities in change, it also includes the individual's perspective. It is through the oral tradition and storytelling that we are capable of hearing the voices of those who had been silenced. Because their voices also matter. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyse the importance of the individual's story in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, and how it is affected by plenty different features such as matters of gender and social oppression.

Atwood is one of the most recognised female writers in Canada. In a country in which Literature has not played an important role for the nation's culture until relatively recently, she has managed to stand out for her skillful writing as well as for her concern with human rights and environmental issues. In order to get a wider perspective about her life as well as the context around her and the novel, I have worked with different articles and books that are referenced at the end of the essay. By reading the works of authors such as Nathalie Cooke and Marie-Thérèse Blanc I have been able to understand the relationship between the novel and the context in which it is set. Nonetheless, the author whose works I have found most helpful for my research is Coral Ann Howells. Moreover, thanks to the help of the supervisor of my essay, María Jesús Hernández Lerena, I have been honoured to ask her a few questions about Margaret Atwood and Canadian literature

that I will include in my analysis of the novel. I also have added the whole interview to the annex of the paper.

I have divided the essay into five main parts. The first part is devoted to Atwood's life and her most famous works. It is depicted how she became so acquainted with topics like feminism, nationalism and the environment. Secondly, a brief context about Literature in Canada is given, particularly about female authors. In the following part, the historical context of the novel is addressed. I have looked for information about the real case on which the novel is based: the murder of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery at the Township of Vaughan, Home District, Upper Canada in 1843. The last two parts of the essay dive directly into *Alias Grace*. First, the text deals with how Grace – the main character of the novel – is able to tell her story and the different aspects that affect her narration. And finally, the last part of the paper offers a connection between Grace and three other female characters in social and gender terms.

2. MARGARET ATWOOD

Atwood was born on 18 November 1939 in Ottawa, Canada. Her love for writing originated when she was very young. She began to write when she was five years old, however she argues that there was a period of time between the age of eight and sixteen that she did not write. It was after that period that she realized writing was her true passion. (Staines 12). However, at that time, Literature in Canada was not a popular part of the national culture. “In the fifties Canada was a country not conversant with its own cultural identity. For many writers of the period, publication had to take place elsewhere, their band of readers distinctly negligible in Canada.” (Staines 13). Indeed, famous works of literature like Mordecai Richler’s *The Acrobats* (1954) were published in the United States and England but not in Canada.

Despite the difficulties, Atwood was resolute in her decision to keep writing; hence she took every opportunity at her hand of making that dream come true including going abroad in order to improve her knowledge in the field. She first “enrolled in the honors English Language and Literature program at Victoria College in the University of Toronto in 1957” (Staines 13). It marked the first steps of her professional career in writing. She learned there about the most famous authors internationally. When she graduated, she began her post graduate studies in Harvard University where she learned about her country from an outsider’s perspective.

Some recurrent themes that are dealt with in her works are nationalism, feminism and the environment. Atwood’s concerns about the environment can be tracked down to her childhood. According to Cooke, the one to be blamed of this resolution is her father – Carl Atwood. “He was a forest entomologist and professor of zoology at the University of Toronto” (Cooke 3) During his whole life, he had a close relationship with the wilderness. He not only had a positive influence in her but also inspired some of her works.

Moreover, even though Atwood moved to Toronto with her family when she was seven years old, they kept making trips to the wild Canada. “When Atwood returns to focus on the wilderness in her fiction, most obviously in stories like “Death by Landscape” and “The Age of Lead” in *Wilderness Tips* (1991), it seems to draw her back to the landscape of her younger years as a camp counselor.” (Cooke 5) She worked as a camp counselor for several summers which helped her to find a connection with the Canadian wilderness.

While Atwood learned from her father to love nature, it is thanks to her mother's family that she became interested in feminism. Her mother's family opened to her a world full of possibilities that was not available for women at the time. Her mother and her aunts were role models of strong women; hence she grew up in an empowering environment. (Cooke 6) Moreover, she was also witness of the many differences between men and women: "...by the time of her first full-length publications (*The Circle Game* in 1966 and *The Edible Woman* in 1969), Atwood was acutely aware of the double standards facing women and was prepared to use her writing to expose them." (Cooke 9). She felt the urge to write about it in order to create a reaction in her readers. Accordingly, a depiction of some of her most famous works will be included here to illustrate those different features of her work.

Atwood is in fact a very prolific author. She is known for her successful works of poetry, fiction and literary criticism. She wrote the poetry collection *The Circle Game* (1966) and its last poem "The Settlers" won the President's Medal from the University of Western Ontario. She published *The Edible Woman* in 1969. However even though the novel coincided with the development of feminism in the United States, when Atwood wrote it, she did not know about it and actually her intention could be said to be an exposure of the existing inequality. (Staines 17) She also wrote *Surfacing* (1972) and *Survival* which collect topics such as Canadian nationalism and Canadian culture, feminism, death, etc. and also raise up concerns about the threat of "Americanization of Canada" (Cooke 2). In 1976 she published *Lady Oracle* (1976), a comic gothic novel. Gothic is indeed an element that is present in other of her works as well. Three years later she published *Life Before Man* which addresses also concerns about feminism. Moreover, she won the Booker Prize in 2000 for *The Blind Assassin*.

Atwood has always been very concerned with social and political issues not only in Canada but internationally. Therefore, her writings have an active role in changing things for the better. In addition, by taking a look at the themes of her work, it can be deduced that she believes in the power of literature to change the world. Even in her first works she shows her concerns with the representation of women, as well as human rights.

The social dimensions of Atwood's fiction are always underpinned and sometimes undermined by representations of individual behavior, for if there is a single distinguishing Atwoodian marker, it is her insistently ironic vision which challenges her

readers' complacent acceptance of easy definitions about anything. (Howells, *Margaret Atwood* 2)

Consequently, it could be said that one of her purposes is to give voice and strength to those collectives that have been marginalised by society as well as looking for an active response in the reader.

With Atwood's novel *Alias Grace*, many of the features that are present in previous works appear once more. According to Howells¹,

[The] Main achievement of *AGrace*: I think it awakens readers (mainly Canadian readers) to the realities of mid C19th Canada, as I said in my chapter in *CCWFiction*, 'to complicate questions of heritage and identity: 'You want squalour, lies, corruption? Hell, we've got 'em homegrown, and not only that, we always have had' (CCCp.27). For non- Canadian readers, I think it's the fascination of Grace's narrative, her fluency, and her deceptiveness; we can never be sure how much she has forgotten and how much she is lying. It also relates directly to Atwood's feminist concerns and women's oppression at the hands of powerful men.

Even though the novel awakens different reactions depending if it the reader is Canadian or not, it certainly has become a success internationally. It poses important questions about the Canadian nationhood and it also is connected to the author's concern with feminism.

¹Annex 1

3. CANADIAN FEMALE WRITERS IN CONTEXT

Canada is a country that was formed by immigrants from different parts of the world. It was a land that was disputed by the world powers of the time:

By the 1850s, profound changes were affecting the Atlantic world. [...] Under the concept of Manifest Destiny expansionist groups in the United States had annexed part of Mexico and were negotiating for the Northwest, including the future British Columbia. [...] In this world of empires, the future Canada consisted but of an interconnected string of settlements ranging from the Maritimes via the St Lawrence valley to Georgian Bay. (Hoerder 5)

The few natives that were left after colonization were compelled to leave their lands and had no other choice but to join other marginalized groups. “By the 1830s, few Amerindians survived the Maritimes, and perhaps only twelve thousand in the two Canadas.” (Hoerder 7) Many of those immigrants were from Irish origin after they were forced to exit the country. Nonetheless, as Hoerder explains in his article, the majority of immigrants that populated Canada came from America as a result of the War of Independence (9). It is also depicted in Laurence Hill’s *Book of Negroes*. The British promised freedom to American slaves; however, they lost the war and those slaves were taken to Canada where they were not able to find freedom either.

Literature was not a part of the Canadian culture until relatively recently. It is after the 1970s that Canada showed a dramatic development in its culture and consequently its literature. It was not only spread within the country but also abroad. It also meant a sudden shift in the role of Canadian women in literature. “Canada’s postwar project of nation-building and its search for an independent identity coalescing around the 1967 Centennial year saw widespread changes on the cultural scene, as “culture” was appropriated as a vehicle for domestic and foreign policy.” (Howells, “Writing Women” 195). Canadian writers took an impulse and found its place in the world of Literature. Furthermore, the 70s was the decade of the second-wave feminism. Therefore, Canadian women took advantage of this new opportunity to revindicate about feminism in their writings and also their works reached a wider range of readers for the same reason. Moreover, women’s writing takes indeed a very important role in Canadian literature. There are several well-known female writers in the country and internationally: Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Margaret Lawrence, Carol Shields, Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, etc.

The subversive writing that started in the 70s continued in the following decades. In fact, it can be seen a development in its popularity. Writers like Aritha Van Herk had indeed a prominent role for this outcome. According to Howells, “Van Herk’s restlessness and her ambitious project to expand the imaginative territory for feminist fiction sets the tone for women’s novels in the 1980s, where suddenly “transgression” supplants “subversion” as the key motif.” (“Writing Women” 203) The literature of these women has a purpose, a purpose for identity and recognition. Denouncing what it is wrong and fighting for equality. Furthermore, their works are a representation of History combined with pieces of individual and collective memory. This feature can be found in Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, as Howells² explains:

As for cultural work, stories articulate our responses to present circumstances, and they also preserve collective social and national memory, though the emphases shift over time, as Atwood suggests in *Alias Grace*, where she unsettles the old stories about Canada's colonial heritage by telling a tale of murder and women's sexual abuse in C19th Canada.

It is, therefore, a novel that stands for a sense of sisterhood that is important in terms of identity and belonging.

² Annex 1

4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

In the mid-nineteenth century upper Canada, the time and place where both the case and the novel are set, the criminal law was different from how it is nowadays. The opinion that people had, and also assumed or even invented, of criminals was very important for said process of justice. However, people's opinion was biased by personal beliefs and stereotypes. "Cultural assumptions about the characteristics of young persons, especially notions of femininity and masculinity adhering to images of youth, influenced the ways in which youthful criminal behavior was—quite literally—seen." (Houston 40) In fact, they could file petitions in order to influence the judge's resolution about certain crimes, and there were many times in which those petitions were successful. "The process was often lengthy, the outcome unpredictable and infrequently in favour of the accused. [...] Petitions played an especially prominent part in cases involving youthful defendants" (Houston 41-42) Therefore, the rules at court were not strictly followed.

In addition, murder was not a common crime at the time. "In the first half of the nineteenth century in the English-speaking communities of British North America, the crime of murder was relatively uncommon. Youthful 'killers' were exotic." (Houston 40) Consequently, the murder of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery caused commotion in upper Canada. The fact that not only there had been a murder but that indeed it had been committed by a young man and a young girl was not something expected. In addition, the fact that a young female could have been an accomplice of a double murder attracted the attention of numerous people. It was thought that that kind of evil was only found in men. Moreover, it was a common belief that women were not capable of carrying out serious crimes like men. It was thought that women were more vulnerable and influenceable. They could not be able to do such crimes, let alone come up with such ideas.

Evidence of the malicious influence which a parent could exert over a young girl was invariably deplored by the justices, yet their reasoning hinged on conventional assumptions about the malleable character and inherent vulnerability of young females. Young males, on the other hand, were deemed to have formed a character by a fairly young age. (Houston 45)

As Houston points out, many parents took justice by their hand in what young women respected. This treatment of young females in the family environment is indeed represented in Atwood's *Alias Grace* with the relationship between Grace and her father.

In June 1843, Grace Marks was living with Thomas Watson, a shoemaker, when she met Nancy Montgomery in one of her periodical visits there. Montgomery hired Marks as a servant for Thomas Kinnear and Marks started working at his house the following month. When she went there, James McDermott had already been working there for a week. However, Marks was witness of several disagreements between Montgomery and him. In fact, Montgomery told McDermott that he would have to live by the end of the month giving the circumstances. This resolution caused in him great anger and resentment. He used Grace Marks to relieve some of this anger by telling her how he felt about Montgomery's decision: "... he often after this told me he was glad he was going, as he did not wish any longer to live with a parcel of w-----s but would have satisfaction before he went, and he told me he was positive that Kinnear and the housekeeper, Nancy, slept together." (Mark's Voluntary Confession, 3). According to Grace Mark's voluntary confession, a week later McDermott told her his plans about the crime. He was going to wait for Kinnear to leave to the city to kill Nancy Montgomery. Then, once Kinnear came back, McDermott told Marks that he would shoot him and take all his valuable belongings before escaping to the United States. When Kinnear left to the city, McDermott was determined to carry out his plan and told Marks about how he was going to kill Montgomery that night. "I persuaded him not to do so *that* night; he had made me promise to assist him, and I agreed to do so." (Marks 4) According to her confession, Marks managed to delay the murder when McDermott decided to do it at night arguing that he could miss and hit her instead. And one more when he wanted to kill her in the room, saying that the floor would be stained of blood. Nonetheless, he finally attacked Nancy Montgomery and asked Marks to help him moving the body and even asked her for a handkerchief to finish her off.

When Mr. Kinnear came back, McDermott made sure that Marks would assist him and shot him dead. When Marks found out about it, she was scared and tried to escape. McDermott fired at her as well, but he failed, and she fainted. When James Walsh came to the house, they managed to keep him away, but he suspected that something was going on. When he left, they packed everything and started their runaway. They made a stop at Toronto and went by boat to Lewiston where they were arrested and taken back to Toronto.

According to James McDermott's confession, which is indeed shorter than Mark's, what happened was exactly the opposite. "She and the Housekeeper used often to quarrel, and she told me she was determined if I would assist her, she would poison both the Housekeeper and Mr.

Kinnear by mixing poison with the porridge” (McDermott 15). In fact, he argued that he refused to help and also tried to talk her out of it.

According to evidence presented at her trial, Grace Marks became obsessed with the advantages accorded to Nancy and resentful of taking orders from a fellow servant. Her jealousy and raged culminated – according to her accusers – in her participation in the brutal murders of Nancy and Thomas Kinnear. (Darroch 105)

McDermott said that, in the end, he had no other choice but to accept it. “Grace Marks is wrong in stating she had no hand in the murder; she was the means from beginning to end.” (McDermott 16) He was aware of Mark’s statement and showed his strong disagreement to it. Nevertheless, it did not affect the judge’s resolution and he was sentenced to death.

The trials of James McDermott and Grace Marks for the murder of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery took place in November 1843. Comparing the confessions of both defendants, it can be observed that said confessions are completely different. James McDermott defended that Grace Marks was the master mind behind the murder.

Furthermore, since murder was not a common crime at the time, and that it had been committed by two young people, a man and a girl, it was a very popular case. Nonetheless, the popularity was more about morbid interest rather than for the seeking of justice for the victims. In fact, many people were interested with this case. “The assemblage of people was immense” Many people were present at James McDermott’s execution. He defended till the very end that Grace Marks played an important role in the murders of Nancy Montgomery and Mr. Kinnear.

There were several witnesses that related Grace to the murder and held evidence against her. Although, an important part of that evidence was mere speculation. The defense said that Grace Marks had only acted out of the fear for her own life However, the Jury decided that both defendants had to be executed “Sentence of death was pronounced against the prisoner Grace Marks to be executed at the same time as McDermott.” (“The Trial of Grace Marks”). However, in the end only McDermott was sentenced to death while Marks and she was incarcerated.

5. GRACE

The novel begins in 1851. The first chapter looks as if she was having a hallucination or she was dreaming. She is seeing Nancy covered by blood and also the peonies outside.

But I do not break step, I do not run, I keep on walking two by two; and then Nancy smiles, only the mouth her eyes are hidden by the blood and the hair, and then she scatters into patches of colour, a drift of red cloth petals across the stones. [...] the cellar walls are all around me, and I know I will never get out. (6-7)

Grace is about to turn twenty-four years old and has been in the penitentiary for almost eight years. The guilt is consuming her, and she knows that there is no hope in a foreseeable future. After that description, she refers to her narration of the story to Dr Jordan. It is the first time she mentions him and also that the novel is going to be about her story.

Then there is a jump in her narration. It has been 16 years since the murder of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear in 1843. Grace Marks has been imprisoned since then at Kingston Penitentiary. She starts by telling how her life is at the penitentiary. She introduces the Governor, his wife and the other prisoners. She also explains how everything works there: how important appearances are, how the prisoners are treated, etc. It is not until chapter 5 that she first encounters Dr Simon Jordan. Grace's memory fails, apparently, she cannot recollect some of the crucial events surrounding the murder of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear. These lacunae may be due to her fear of a life sentence. Dr Jordan is supposed to help her remember.

When they first meet, she is scared because she had been told that a doctor was coming to see her. She remembers what a doctor did to Mary and is not willing to go through anything like that. Therefore, she is reluctant about meeting him and letting him examine her. "Help is what they offer but gratitude is what they want, they roll around in it like cats in the catnip. He wishes to go home and say to himself, I stuck in my thumb and pulled out the plum, what a good boy am I. But I will not be anybody's plum. I say nothing." (46). She feels that she is in control of the situation. She only tells him what she wants him to hear because she does not trust him. She cannot trust anyone anymore and she knows that he is not there to help her. However, after several meetings she becomes more relaxed. She starts being honest because now it is the time to tell her story.

5. 1 Conversations with Dr Jordan

Grace begins her narration with information about her childhood in the North of Ireland. It can be seen just from the very beginning how she feels haunted by her past. When she talks to Dr Jordan about what it seems to be her other life, it feels as if she is traveling with her mind to that very specific moment. In the sense that it is more than just telling something that happened to her. Those specific moments of her life strike her all over again and the readers as well.

Even though at the beginning she was suspicious about him, after their first meetings, Grace starts regarding their conversations from a different perspective. Although their meetings are not optional to Grace, she likes talking to Dr Jordan. She does not think of their conversation as a therapy but as a way of entertainment. Her life is extremely dull at the Penitentiary. She spends many hours a day, if not the whole day, locked up in her cell with no one to talk to. In fact, the isolation is affecting her mental health as well. Therefore, she finds her chats with Dr Jordan as an interesting way of keeping her mind out of her monotonous reality. She looks forward to their next meetings and wonders what he will bring her next time. Because one of his tactics is to bring her objects that he thinks could awake a memory in her mind. "He hadn't brought any vegetable with him, to ask me what I might think of it; and I was a little taken aback, as I had become used to this part of the afternoon, and had enjoyed wondering what he would bring next, and what it was he wanted me to say about it." (281). Moreover, it seems that she likes him or at least that she finds him intriguing. Grace wants to please Dr Jordan. More than that, she wants his acceptance. She wants to say something that could help him in his task. Furthermore, she needs affection after being isolated for so long. Even before being at the Penitentiary she had not felt any kind of love since Mary Whitney died.

These conversations apart from entertaining Grace are very useful, not only for the case but also for herself. She is trying to figure out what really happened and who she is. She finds herself without a place where to belong. After everything she has gone through, and all the places she has left behind, it seems that she does not feel part of anything.

However, it seems that for Dr Jordan is mostly about a professional or personal challenge. He is not so concerned about finding the truth behind the murder, he wants to prove that he is capable enough of deciphering Grace's mind. In fact, everyone around Grace seem wanting to know the truth just for the sake of it. It is indeed Grace the most "human" character. Moreover, Dr

Jordan is also attracted to Grace sexually. Therefore, even though he represents the role of a more rational man, he also takes part in sexualizing Grace. He appears to have a dark side that does not show to Grace, or even people in general. He is very interested in appearances and “luxuries”. He does not like where he has to stay. “In reality the egg had the consistency of the excised tumour a fellow medical student once slipped into his pocket for a joke...” (85) Nothing seems to be good enough for him.

Even though Dr Jordan has a very prominent role in Atwood’s novel, he is an invented character. He did not exist in real life; therefore, without him, Grace Marks was not able to tell her story. With this character Atwood gives Grace the possibility of defending herself against the popular opinion. Atwood gives her the chance of giving a closer version to the reality of the crime. However, his testimony, along with that of other male characters such as the Reverend Verringer or Kenneth McKenzie (Grace’s lawyer) is thought to be of more relevance than the alleged murderer’s. “Thus Grace’s own version of her story is set against a powerful multiplicity of male evaluations and judgements.” (Buchinger 26). The evaluations that the different male characters do over the case and to Grace are worthier than what she has to say; therefore, her testimony as direct witness comes second.

Grace sees Dr Jordan’s true self the very first moment that they meet; conversely, she lets herself be carried away by her narration. Because even though he is not very helpful to the case or to Grace, he does give her the chance to tell her story. She is intrigued by his method of investigation as well. It is then an opportunity for her to talk to someone and to be entertained from her dull life at the penitentiary. Furthermore, the novel also offers a narration from Dr Jordan’s point of view; therefore, his character provides an outsider’s perspective to Grace’s life at the penitentiary.

5.2 Memory and Hypnotism

Memory is not the most trustful source of information. In fact, if two people were witnesses of the same event, they would certainly remember it differently according to what they paid more attention to and their ideologies. Atwood addressed the topic of the unreliability of memory in *In Search of Alias Grace*:

Susanna Moodie said that the outset of her account that she was writing the Grace Marks's story from memory, and as it turns out, her memory was not better than most. [...] All commentators agreed that Grace was uncommonly good-looking, but they could not agree on her height or the colour of her hair. (*In Search* 33)

Everyone claimed to know everything about Grace Marks. People thought that that she was guilty and that there was a lot of evidence that could prove it; conversely, in the end they did not know so much at all. As Atwood says, all commentators agreed on some details, but they were also lacking others. It seems that they were only trying to find a common opinion so it would mean that it was a "correct" opinion. Moreover, it would also mean that the murderer was not on the loose. It was then a way of giving themselves peace of mind too.

Memory is in fact one of the most important pillars on which the novel is based. Grace is supposed to tell her story to Dr Jordan; conversely, some pieces of her mind seem to have frozen. Both Grace and the experts working in her case want her to remember. One of the resources for the recovery of her lost memory is offered by one of Grace's old friends Jeremiah the Peddler. He was always a traveling seller who offered bargains from town to town. However, he appears again in scene as a completely different character. He is now called Jerome DuPont and states that he can help Grace dig up her lost memories. She knows him from her past, but he asks her not to tell the others about it and promises that he is going to help her. However, he does not care about how everything will turn out for Grace. He is doing this for his own benefit. He is just trying to forget the person he was in order to become someone rich and famous.

Jerome wants to carry out a "scientific procedure" to help her remember. Moreover, there are many people about to witness his procedure and he tells them: "Please banish all thoughts of Mesmerism, and other such fraudulent procedures." (460). "Mesmerism" is the name that was given to the now called "Hypnotism". As Tatar defends, "mesmerism serves as the principal link connecting primitive rites of exorcism with modern psychoanalysis, Mesmer himself has assumed the role of a transitional figure in the development of therapeutic procedures for functional disorders." (3). However, due to the reluctance of the witnesses to see something related to mesmerism, it can be observed that it was not very well seen. It is seen as a procedure that does not rely on a process of reasoning and that is far from scientific.

Jerome makes Grace go into a trance. However, when he starts questioning her, she adopts a different personality – which she later defends to be the personality of Mary Whitney. "This

voice cannot be Grace's; yet in that case, whose voice is it? [...] 'You'd like to know that, so I'll tell you. Yes. I would meet him outside, I'd let him kiss me, and touch me as well, all over, Doctor, the same places you'd like to touch me...' (465) According to López, it is implied in this scene that her true nature is not the one she was showing to everyone but the one that was awakened during the hypnosis:

[...] Grace delivers a speech with a voice that is not her own but apparently that of her dear dead friend and fellow servant, Mary Whitney, whose ghost has supposedly taken possession of Grace's body. The implication is that it was Mary who committed the crime, and not Grace, and hence that "Grace" is an alias concealing her true identity. (164-165)

Not even the voice that comes out of Grace's mouth sounds like her own. Nevertheless, they want to know if she had had sexual intercourse with McDermott when she worked at Mr. Kinnear which Grace had always denied. Nonetheless, the Grace in trance answers affirmatively. It can be argued that she has become the person that everyone thought she was.

After everything that she has gone through Grace is not able to distinguish anymore the real from the imagined. However, this procedure does not help Grace to accomplish that task. It seems instead that she is giving everyone what they had been expecting, thus making herself look even more guilty. It could not be helpful to have everyone around her trying to guess what happened. Every person had their own theory, each of them more and more macabre. Therefore, instead of helping her to find the memories that she had lost, they could have been making false memories sound like truth in the head of a mentally unstable prisoner. Nonetheless, there is no way of knowing the truth. This only confirms the unreliability of memory as well as the unreliability of the investigation process around the case of Grace Marks.

5.3 Narration

The act of telling a story is closely related to the sense of identity and belonging. It is a way of giving voice to those who have not been able to speak for themselves. It is also a way of passing on knowledge to next generations as well as a means to keep memories alive. There are different ways of narrating a story that do not only follow the written or oral tradition. As it can be seen in the novel, one of them is the art of quilting: "Grace's quilting itself stands as a metaphor for the

alternative forms of thinking about and narrating the past (427). Narrative, however, is offered both as the key to times gone by and as a fallible tool [...]” (Blanc 102). Since she was very young, Grace has always been a skilled seamstress. It was one of the skills that helped her get her first jobs as a maid. At the penitentiary, quilting becomes a chore too. In the following scene, she is sewing a Log Cabin quilt for one of the governor’s ladies and she explains why it is considered so important: “A Log Cabin quilt is a thing every young woman should have before marriage, as it means the home; and there is always a red square at the centre, which means the hearth fire.” (112). Therefore, Grace represents the relevance of oral tradition by both her quilting and her narration.

In addition, the question of memory is not only from an individual perspective, the character’s, but also embraces ideas of cultural memory and nationhood. Collective memory is part of History, and sometimes people omit the parts of History that are not likeable: “As a rule, we tend to remember the awful things done to us, and to forget the awful things we did.” (Atwood, *In Search* 8). Therefore, Grace represents in the novel more than just the individual memory, she embodies the collective memory problems of a nation. As Howells defends:

The reliability of individual and collective memory poses problems, and it seems to me that Atwood’s novel is foregrounding the dimensions of amnesia in Canada’s discourse of nationhood [...] via the personal forgetting of Grace Marks. Interestingly, Atwood adds Simon Jordan the American to her company of amnesiacs, for such nervous condition crosses borders not only of gender but of nationality as well. (*Contemporary Canadian* 38)

Atwood is then supporting the fact that the condition of amnesia affects everyone. It does not only imply the “inferior” sex and it does not only imply immigrants. It also affects people that were considered of a high status. Moreover, this amnesia is not just a clinical condition; it is also a choice. The choice of forgetting what we are not proud of.

Grace is really mature for a girl of her age. She was forced to grow up when her mother died. She was barely thirteen when she became her family’s only source of livelihood. Moreover, without her mother, her father’s rage had only one target, Grace. She found herself without no one to love her or even support her. She was lucky enough to be able to get away from his alcoholic father, or else she could have ended even worse, but she was never free – physically nor mentally.

There are moments in her narration that even Grace herself does not know whether or not she is telling the truth, or if something is going on with her. Telling the story to Dr Jordan is in fact a way of organising the memories in her mind.

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered blood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. (346)

Something terrible has happened, and she acknowledges that she had something to do with it. Nonetheless, when she tries to remember the moment in which the murders took place, she only finds an empty space in her mind. It is as if her memories were kept in drawers and she could not access some of those drawers because they are locked. And only Grace has the key to open them. However, even though she is scared about what she might find, she wants to know the truth. Furthermore, she is given the chance to tell her story which gives her some of the importance she had been denied of.

5.4 Object of sexualization

Grace is constantly treated as an object of desire during her whole life. Even when she was just a little girl, there are men that sexualize her. As Blanc states: "But Mary's early demise forces Grace to seek employment elsewhere and to become personally acquainted with sexual harassment." (118). For instance, after talking about how she worked as a maid in several homes, she tells Dr Jordan about the time when she was working at Mr. Haraghy's. At first it was normal, but then he started to show a different behavior around her like harassing her while she was just doing her job. She came to the decision of locking herself at night: "I always locked myself in at night, but I knew that lock or no lock, sooner or later he would find a way of getting in, [...] and once you are found with a man in your room you are the guilty one, no matter how they get in." (231) She was the one to be blamed if something happened between them even if she did not want him in her room or even near her.

However, this is something is recurrent in her life. A "dealer in farm implements" said this to her when she was travelling to Thomas Kinnear's after having decided to work there for Nancy: "... I expect you have a good hair on you, underneath your cap; and all this time he was pressing

up against me in a way I was finding offensive” (238). Everywhere she goes, she gets the unwanted attention of men that desire her, and they do not even bother to keep it to themselves. They do not care indeed about her feelings, they just want her and do not mind ruining her life.

Moreover, the harassing did not only happen before the murder. After Grace’s imprisonment she still has to cope with situations like the ones described above. She is about to take a walk with two keepers and both of them start talking about her as if she were an object and denigrating her. One of them particularly says to her: “... and best not to waste God’s gifts to us, speaking of which Grace, you’re ripe enough to be picked, why stay on the tree unwanted, you’ll just fall off and rot at the foot of it in any case.” (279) He says it as if he was doing her a favour. He does not want her to go off without no one “tasting” her. And according to him, she would not want either. He speaks of her like the fruit of a tree that is now ripe. It is not that he is attracted by her and wants to seduce her; it is that he wants to do her a favour, when he is indeed just doing himself a favour.

5.5 Situation at the penitentiary

Grace has been for several years now at the penitentiary. As it can be seen throughout the novel, the treatment she has received is far from respectful. She has not been the only one affected, the other women imprisoned there have suffered it as well. Grace describes those women in a very peculiar way:

It’s a wonder they can sit down at all, and when they walk, nothing touches their legs under the billowing skirts, except their shifts and stockings. They are like swans, drifting along on unseen feet; or else like the jellyfish on the waters of the rocky harbor near our house, when I was little, before I ever made the long sad journey across the ocean. [...] And that is what the ladies are like: mostly water. (24)

They are drifting towards oblivion after being deprived of their own identity and sense of belonging. They are destroyed from within and cannot do anything to avoid it. They are not themselves anymore, they just wander and do as they are told.

When Grace first meets Dr Jordan, he makes a reference to the Book of Job and even though Grace understands that reference, she acts as if she did not: “I have a good stupid look which I have practiced.” (43). She is aware that she is better when they do not think she is

intelligent. Because if they think she is “stupid”, that would mean that they have her under control. It is better for her if she just pretends to be the stupid girl that she is thought to be. It is less complicated and also less dangerous. They do not want her to be an equal to them as that would make her a threat. Therefore, she is used to fake that look in order to be safer.

When Reverend Verringer is telling Dr Jordan about Grace’s record, a corrupt system is exposed. Grace spent some time at the Asylum. However, at that Asylum Warden Smith took advantage of his position. Reverend Verringer implies that many inmates were made to confess crimes they were innocent of. “He was accused of behavior of the most shocking and brutal kind; his son, for instance, was permitted to use the convicts for target practice [...]. There was talk of his abusing the female prisoners also” (90) Something similar happened with Dr. Bannerling who would have had all the patients chained up if not something worse. Nevertheless, even though Reverend Verringer affirms to condemn the system, he does nothing to ameliorate the injustice done to them.

People of a high status did not worry about justice, they worried about knowledge. Dr Jordan points it out: “It was knowledge they craved; yet they could not admit to craving it, because it was forbidden knowledge” (94). However, Dr Jordan is to be included in that very same group of people. Knowledge is the source of power. Everyone wants to know everything and they even long more for those things that are secret and bad for others. It can also be seen in how the governor’s wife is obsessed with collecting information about crimes in her scrapbook. It is a representation of the people of the time, who were obsessed with knowledge and who also influenced court proceedings. Furthermore, it is shown in the novel how people want to find someone to blame for the horrible things that happen. ‘Rightly or wrongly does not matter,’ she said. ‘People want a guilty person. If there has been a crime, they want to know who did it. They don’t like not knowing.’ (104). They do not want to find the truth, they just want to peace the masses and make them feel safe.

6. CONNECTION BETWEEN GRACE, HER MOTHER, MARY AND NANCY

6.1 Grace's mother

One of the events that most swirls around Grace's mind is her mother's death. In their first meetings, she tells Dr Jordan how her life was before coming to Canada, how her relationships with the other members of her family were when she was just a child. When she addresses her relationship with her mother, some issues come to the foreground.

Aunt Pauline was always telling her to stand up to my father, and my father would tell her to stand up to Aunt Pauline, and between the two of them they squashed her flat. She was a timid creature, hesitating, and weak and delicate, which used to anger me. I wanted her to be stronger, so I would not have to be so strong myself. (120)

Grace was witness of her mother's weakness, or what she thought that represented weakness. Nonetheless, she was not aware of how difficult things were for her mother as well. Grace was a child and what she needed is someone to love her and protect her against all the bad things. She was scared and she wanted her mother to be stronger. More than that, she wanted to find in her a figure of protection against the danger that her father represented.

Grace's mother and aunt came from a religious family. Nonetheless, once their father died, they had to find a husband that could support them. Aunt Pauline was luckier than Grace's mother and she was aware of that: "[...] she blessed her lucky stars and was thankful, because a woman could do worse; and what she meant was that my mother had." (120). Therefore, it is a direct reference to an unlucky marriage. Even though Grace says that in the beginning the situation was not that bad, when her father became an alcoholic the situation aggravated. Moreover, not only had Grace's mother to put up with an abusive husband, that she also had to cope with the loss of several children: "They did not put in the dead ones, which were three, not counting the baby that was lost before being born, and never had a name." (121). It was still a big family that they had to support. Nonetheless, with an alcoholic husband that could not get a job and who also spent all their money, Grace's mother was the only one that provided for the family. She sewed shirts and Grace helped her. It was from her that Grace learned how to sew. Therefore, it could be said that Grace continues her legacy by doing it as well.

However, everything got even worse when Grace's mother died. They were having many economic problems in Ireland and decided to travel all the way through the Atlantic Ocean to "the

Canadas” expecting to find a fresh start: “Many were doing it, and there was free land to be had in the Canadas, and what my father needed was to wipe the slate clean.” (127). Nevertheless, the conditions of the trip were deplorable. Her mother gets sick in the ship and dies before arriving to their destination. They even have to drop her body into the ocean instead of burying her after their arrival. This memory follows her wherever she goes. It can be seen for instance in the following scene. Grace had been talking to her friend Mary Whitney about boys and getting married someday. However, when she is about to sleep, she is not thinking about her future or boys. Pieces from her memory and her subconscious are dragging her to the depths of her past.

Instead I dreamt of my mother in her winding sheet, drifting down through the cold water, which was blue-green in colour; and the sheet began to come undone at the top, and it waved as if in the wind, and her hair floated out, rippling like seaweed [...] and then I knew that this was not my mother at all, but some other woman, and she was not dead inside the sheet at all, but still alive. (193)

Grace also feels guilty about her mother’s death. The thought of her mother drifting down the ocean keeps coming to her mind when she is most vulnerable. It is indeed like a macabre nightmare that her restless mind produces because of her feeling of guilt. In addition, the fact that she understood that sinking body as that of “other woman”, could be interpreted in different ways. She could mean that the woman inside the sheet is herself. She was noticing how she was losing herself in the way. Moreover, it could also be a premonition, like a relation to the other two women death’s that Grace is going to be witness of: Mary’s and Nancy’s. Finally, it could be understood as a message about the situation of women in general that Grace is witness of during her life.

Grace loses her mother at a young age when she needed her the most. She felt that she was left alone. It could be said that Grace blamed her for that somehow. When her mother was alive, she could not be the mother figure that Grace expected her to be, but then she dies, Grace becomes even more lonely. However, this made her start looking for that strength in herself. After Grace’s mother’s death everything gets even worse, so it could be said that the journey and her death play an important role in the outcome of her life. Nonetheless, Grace becomes aware of how her mother’s situation was not fair at all. She understands how her mother could not be the strong woman she wanted her to be. She had to endure the death of many children, an abusive husband and extreme poverty. Therefore, in the end Grace does not longer blame her mother but she blames herself instead.

6.2 Mary Whitney

After arriving to Canada, Grace and her family were staying at Mrs. Burts. However, once Mrs. Burts realised that Grace's father was not interested in her, she told them that they had to find another place to stay if they did not pay rent. Nonetheless, she helped Grace to find her first job at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson. It was there that Grace met Mary Whitney who was also working as a maid. Grace was about to turn thirteen years old and Mary was sixteen. This marked the beginning of one of Grace's happiest periods in life:

Now, Sir, I say, I will come to a happier part of my story; and in this part I will tell you about Mary Whitney; and then you will understand why it was her name I borrowed, when I was in need of it; for she was never one to refuse a friend in need, and I hope I stood by her as well, when the time came for it. (169)

Before meeting Mary, Grace was alone. She had just left her brothers and sisters behind because she could no longer stand the company of her father: "Already my arms were black and blue, and then one night he threw me against the wall, as he'd sometimes done with my mother, shouting that I was a slut and a whore, and I fainted..." (149). She had taken up the space her mother had left, and she could not take it anymore; she thought it was better to be on her own. Nonetheless, at Mrs Alderman Parkinson's, Grace found what she needed most: "Before Mary Whitney's death, Grace's time as a servant at Mrs Alderman Parkinson's household is so filled with warmth, camaraderie, and relative security that Jordan himself admits, a little nostalgically, that it reminds him of his own happy childhood..." (Blanc 118). She finally found someone around her age to share thoughts and feelings, a true confidant. Moreover, she found someone to feel safe around.

Mary Whitney was a very straight forward girl, especially with Grace. "Mary said I might be very young, and as ignorant as an egg, but I was bright as a new penny, and the difference between stupid and ignorant was that ignorant could learn." (172). Since she was older than Grace, she had got more time to learn about life. She did not hesitate in saying what she thought about something without any filters. A similar behaviour can be observed in the older Grace. Since Grace deeply admired Mary, she became her role model, someone to look up to.

However, after a while Mary started to behave differently as Grace noticed. She came back late at night and she was not as cheerful as she normally was. Grace felt Mary's need for a confidant

and asked her what her problem was. Mary was pregnant and even though they tried to find a way of delivering the baby themselves, they thought that they would be caught and get into even more trouble. Mary talked to the man, but he did not want anything to do with her and even implied that the baby could be someone else's: "[...] if she threatened him with a scandal, or went to his family, he would deny it, and ruin whatever reputation she had left; and if she wanted a quick end to her troubles she could always drown herself." (202) Even though Mary did not say who the father was, Grace mentioned that one of the two sons of the household was still at the house – Mr. George, and everything points towards him. He was just looking for some entertainment at the house and he ruined Mary's life. She thought at first that it was true love, but she understood that it was nothing like that. She was not a girl that he would date. Maybe if she would have been the daughter of a lady, things could have turned out differently. As a result, Mary could not tell anyone about it, or her life would be ruined either by the father or by Mrs. Alderman Parkinson. She was left with no other choice but to get an abortion. However, even though the doctor helps her with this matter, he also causes in her an internal bleeding that leads to her death. Leaving her bleeding with a knife, the younger Grace did not understand what was going on and prayed for her life.

After Mary died, Grace collected all the money she had in order to give her the best burial she could afford. "The coffin was pine boards and very plain, as I wanted a stone marker too for the money; but I had only enough for her name. [...] I was thinking of my mother as well, who'd had no proper burial with dirt on top the way it should be, but was just tossed into the sea." (229) Nonetheless, it could be said that when she when she buried Mary Whitney, she also buried her mother. Grace had not yet overcome how she died and how Grace and her family had to let her go to the depths of the Atlantic Ocean with their oldest sheet and not the new one. Therefore, by giving Mary a dignified burial, Grace was able to find closure for both Mary and her mother.

With no one else to count on, Grace and Mary found in each other a true friend. More than that, they found the family they were lacking; a bond of sisterhood was therefore created between them. Furthermore, with Mary, Grace could be the child that she had not been since her mother died. She could relax and be herself, loosen the strings for a bit. However, it could also be argued that their relationship went beyond that. In fact, Grace's devotion towards Mary could be interpreted romantically. She did not only look up to her but also felt a connection with her stronger than with anyone else.

6.3 Nancy Montgomery

After Mary died, it was not long till Grace decided that she could not stay at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's anymore. The ladies of the house were not nice to her; she felt that she was not welcome there after Mary's death. Consequently, she started looking for a new house where to work. Nonetheless, this decision is what led Grace to meet Nancy Montgomery. She was staying at Mr. Watson's, a shoemaker, when Nancy came to run an errand. She was twenty-four years old when Grace met her. She was very pretty and cheerful and reminded Grace of her beloved lost friend. "[...] she had beautiful brown eyes, and she laughed and joked as much as Mary Whitney had done, and seemed very good-natured." (232). Grace was still in mourning. Moreover, it was the second time that she had lost someone so close to her. Therefore, when the nice Nancy Montgomery offered her a job at Mr. Thomas Kinnear's house, she saw the opportunity of having something similar to what she had recently lost.

Nonetheless, Grace sensed trouble the very same day she got to the house. Nancy was not the same friendly girl she met at Mr. Watson's. "She waved a hand daintily in my direction, but she made no move to come over to me; and something squeezed tight about my heart." (242). Nancy's rejection towards Grace could be interpreted as a result from her relationship with Mr. Kinnear. For Nancy, Grace was a threat. She could not just steal what Nancy had built. That was why she treated Grace so badly sometimes. Kinnear made it look like a competition between both for his love. For him it was nothing more than a game.

However, there are scenes in the novel where Nancy laid down the shield that she had built against Grace. For instance, when Mr. Kinnear was not at home for the night, Nancy asked Grace to sleep in the same room so not to be alone: "...she said she was afraid to sleep alone when Mr. Kinnear was not at home, and would I sleep upstairs with her." (270). She felt safer with Grace around. Against what could happen they were together. Other scene where a sense of sisterhood can be felt is when some friends of Mr. Kinnear arrived home: "She did not wish to do it herself, but sat in the kitchen, and had a glass of wine, and poured one for me as well; and I thought she was resentful of these gentlemen." (291). Nancy needed someone like her with whom be able to share thoughts and feelings. It seems that there was a bond that went beyond Mr. Kinnear's oppression.

Furthermore, she was also looked down by people in town as it can be seen when Nancy and Grace went to Church together: "Nancy and I were not greeted warmly by any as we went out,

but rather avoided; [...] and though the gentry or those who fancied themselves such need not notice her, she did not deserve such treatment from the farmers and their wives..." (294). Nancy's concern was already depicted when Grace first met her, like a glimpse of Nancy's true self: "She claimed to be lonely for some female company [...]; also she didn't like being there all by herself, a single woman alone with a gentlemen, as people would talk, and I thought this showed a right feeling." (233) It is something that also Grace was concerned about. They had to live up to everyone's expectations or else their lives would be ruined forever.

Nevertheless, as Mary Whitney did, Nancy started to change. She was getting bigger and the cause of it was just the same it was with Mary: Nancy was pregnant. Once Mr. Kinnear found out about the pregnancy, his behaviour towards Nancy was even more negative: "But I always take in his coffee, said Nancy. Why did he ask you?" (318). She could feel his rejection, as if it were her fault that she had got pregnant. It seemed that Mr. Kinnear was bored of Nancy and wanted a new toy to play with – Grace. However, it was not the first time that Nancy experienced something of the sort. Grace mentioned it was well known that when Nancy worked at the Wrights', she got pregnant and the boy left her. Moreover, the baby died. Her first pregnancy probably was the reason everyone in town looked down on her. Therefore, it explains how Nancy was so worried about her relationship with Mr. Kinnear and how it would look to everyone.

It is depicted throughout the novel the similarities between Mary, Nancy and Grace. As López defends: "What Mary, Nancy, and Grace have definitely shared is their condition as servants, together with suffering due to their female corporeal vulnerability, in the case of the first two, a sexual one [...]" (174). All of them were female servants that had to bear both social and gender oppression. Moreover, Grace's mother is also to be added to the group. She was not given a proper name in the novel and had to deal with an abusive husband and the death of many of her children. There are indeed some elements that connect them together such as the peonies and Grace's quilting at the end of the novel. For instance, Grace puts peonies into Mary's coffin whose burial could be understood as a double burial for both her and Grace's mother. In addition, Grace also sees peonies outside the house when she is working for Nancy. In the end of the novel, Grace is sewing a quilt in which she represents Nancy and Mary as well as herself, as equals. It is from her mother that Grace learned how to sew; therefore, it is as if she were also representing her.

7. CONCLUSION

Through her numerous works Margaret Atwood has been able to leave an imprint in the world of literature that will live on forever. She has filled those works with not only passion and kindness but also with a purpose. Because her literature also carries the weight of change. Always concerned about social and political issues, she never leaves the reader unaffected.

With this novel, *Alias Grace*, Atwood presents several features that are recurrent in her works, like the inspiration in real events for her writings and her concern with feminist matters. However, even though the novel is based on real facts, it is still a work of fiction. Through Atwood's words the reader manages to access Grace's perspective of the events. Because in the real case, there was more importance given to other witnesses than to Grace Marks herself. Furthermore, Grace represents with her narration the significance of storytelling. She does so by telling her story to Dr Jordan and by the act of quilting too. With the narration of her story, Grace is able to start a journey of realisation. She has lost connection with herself and needs to find who she really is. Moreover, it appears Grace blames herself for the tragical events of her life and by telling Dr Jordan she can be judged for everything that haunts her.

Grace is given the chance to tell with her own words everything that she had gone through to get to the cell in which she is currently locked up. Nonetheless, it is a story full of pain. She was just a child when she had to cross the Atlantic Ocean with her family because of economic reasons, losing her mother in the way. As an immigrant and as a woman she did not find a solution to her problems across the pond. She had to leave her brothers and sisters behind in order to escape from her abusive father. Conversely, it did not mean her safety either, as she had to cope with harassment everywhere she went. Nonetheless, it was also the reason that she met Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery. Because Grace does not only tell her own story, she also tells the story of Mary and Nancy: two young women that just like her had to suffer the consequences of social and gender inequalities. However, Grace's mother should also be included in this group. The four of them – Grace, her mother, Mary and Nancy – were women who were mistreated and harassed. Moreover, Grace had to cope with the death of all of them who were more than family and friends, they stood for a representation of the female condition of the time. Treated as inferior during her whole lives, they could not do anything to change their situation.

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9. ANNEX

9.1 An interview with Coral Ann Howells

I have consulted several works in order to write this essay; however, the works of one author in particular have been the most helpful to my research. The writer that I am referring to is Coral Ann Howells, Professor Emerita at the University of Reading. It has been an honour to be able to ask someone with so much knowledge about Margaret Atwood and Canadian Literature. This interview has been in fact very useful to the subject of my study. It has made me reflect upon the matter of storytelling connected to the statement of someone's identity. Moreover, it has also helped me understand Atwood's role in the world of literature. Nonetheless, this interview would not have been possible without the help of my supervisor María Jesús Hernández Lerena. Therefore, I would like to thank them both for their help and support.

Silvia Ríos: Why do you think Margaret Atwood is such a recognised writer internationally? And what is it that you have found most rewarding about working on Atwood?

Coral Ann Howells: The short answer is that she is always absolutely topical, and her fiction offers a socio-cultural context in which to think about our present times. Just consider the impact which *The Handmaid's Tale* has had - immediately after Trump's Presidential election it shot to the top of the bestseller list in the US, and the TV series has transposed those issues around women's oppression, political tyranny and human rights into contemporary terms which resonate far beyond the US. There's also of course Atwood's distinctive way of mixing realism and fantasy, verbal artifice and moral engagement, with her combination of high seriousness and witty ironic vision, which is in fact what I have found most rewarding about working on Atwood.

SR: In your book *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction* (38), you examine the relationship between memory and nationhood. What do you think is the most important cultural work that storytelling does in connection with individual and collective memory?

CAH: Atwood talks a lot about this in *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (pp.41 ff.) where she argues that 'storytelling is part of the matrix of our shared humanity'. As for cultural work, stories articulate our responses to present circumstances, and they also preserve collective

social and national memory, though the emphases shift over time, as Atwood suggests in *Alias Grace*, where she unsettles the old stories about Canada's colonial heritage by telling a tale of murder and women's sexual abuse in C19th Canada.

SR: What do you think lies behind Atwood's idea of writing *Alias Grace*? Could that be to give Grace Marks an opportunity to speak for herself? And what do you think is the main achievement of this novel?

CAH: Yes, in this genre of fictive autobiography she gives Grace an opportunity to speak for herself (which of course she only manages to do through her double, Mary Whitney). Grace is extremely elusive (and clever) in her talks with Dr Jordan.

Main achievement of *AGrace*: I think it awakens readers (mainly Canadian readers) to the realities of mid C19th Canada, as I said in my chapter in *CCWFiction*, 'to complicate questions of heritage and identity: 'You want squalour, lies, corruption? Hell, we've got 'em homegrown, and not only that, we always have had' (CCCp.27). For non- Canadian readers, I think it's the fascination of Grace's narrative, her fluency, and her deceptiveness; we can never be sure how much she has forgotten and how much she is lying. It also relates directly to Atwood's feminist concerns and women's oppression at the hands of powerful men.

SR: Do you think that the Canadian literary growth in the 60s had anything to do with the emergence of Second-wave Feminism?

CAH: Yes, it does, though I think you're talking about the rapid growth of an English-Canadian female literary tradition which belongs to the 1970s and 80s when Canadian women novelists leapt to prominence in Canada and internationally, rather than to the 1960s. In Atwood's Introduction to the 1988 Virago edition of *The Edible Woman* (which was first published 1969) she called it 'protofeminist rather than feminist' for she says that when she wrote the novel in 1965 'there was no women's movement in sight'. However, by 1969 it was just in time to coincide with the rise of feminism in North America- later in Canada than in the US actually- so 1970s is the better date to start with.

SR: If you could read one of Atwood's works again for the first time, which one would you choose?

CAH: *Alias Grace* without a doubt, for its combination of crime novel, social history, its feminist stance, and Atwood's witty deconstruction of a white Canadian identity.

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